

Failed States and Casualty Phobia

Implications for Force Structure and Technology Choices

Jeffrey Record, USAF

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Air War College**

Air University
Maxwell Air Force Base

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Disclaimer

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I. INTRODUCTIONⁱ

The emergence of failed states as the principal source of international political instability and the appearance of mounting casualty phobia among U.S. political and military elites have significant force structure and technology implications. Overseas, intra-state and often irregular warfare is displacing large-scale inter-state conventional combat. At home, there has arisen a new generation of political and military leadership that displays an unprecedented timidity in using force.

Yet the Pentagon continues to prepare to refight the Korean and Gulf Wars—simultaneously, no less!—and to invest heavily in force structures whose commitment to combat would invite politically unacceptable casualties. The air war over Serbia should be a warning to U.S. force planners: In contingencies not involving direct threats to manifestly vital U.S. interests—the post-Cold War norm, elevation of force protection to equal or greater importance than mission accomplishment mandates primary, even exclusive reliance on air power. It further mandates expanded investment in stand-off precision-strike munitions and other technologies providing greater range and accuracy. The Army's combat arms were more or less irrelevant to the war against Serbia because of that service's comparative strategic immobility, and because a casualty-phobic White House and Pentagon leadership had already decided to withhold U.S. ground combat forces from exposure to combat. Yet the war—against a tiny, isolated, third-rate military power—consumed almost one-half the Air Force's deployable combat assets. The defense budget debate of recent years has predictably focused on the scope and wisdom of the post-Cold War cuts in overall defense spending. But the debate has unfortunately sidestepped what is perhaps an even more important issue—namely, the continued sharing out of defense dollars in roughly equal amounts to the various services against the backdrop of dramatically altered international and domestic political landscapes. “Enough of What?” is just as important a defense budget question as “How Much is Enough?”

II. FAILED STATES

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the international political system was dominated by a half-dozen European great powers and Japan. Most of what subsequently became known as the Third World was governed from colonial offices in London, Paris, Lisbon, and Amsterdam. The primary source of instability in a system so constituted was great power rivalry in Europe and overseas. Indeed, with the formation of the modern state in the wake of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), great power war became the scourge of the international political system, and it was waged with increasing ferocity in the wake of the French and Industrial Revolutions.

Since 1945, the international political system has dramatically changed. War seems to have disappeared altogether among advanced industrial states; Europe, the cockpit of large-scale interstate warfare for three centuries, has become a continent of near-universal peace. Explanations for this unexpected phenomenon abound, but most observers believe that Europe's "pacification" is a function of some combination of economic integration, democratization, and war's utter discreditation as a means of settling disputes among states. Michael Mandelbaum believes that sovereign states "remain a central presence in human affairs at the end of the twentieth century. But in the societies that waged the modern era's major wars, the state has found a different purpose....The test of the legitimacy of governments [in these states] is likely to be economic rather than military. The Soviet Union was not defeated on the field of battle. It collapsed from within, in no small part because of economic failures."ⁱⁱ John Mueller argues convincingly that the "psychic costs of war have increased dramatically over the last 200 years or so...in the developed world. Where people once saw great glory and honor in war—and particularly in victory—they are now often inclined to see degradation in it instead as war has increasingly come to be regarded as an enterprise that is immoral, repulsive, and uncivilized."ⁱⁱⁱ

Russia and Switzerland excepted, all of Europe's significant industrial states are members of the European Union, NATO, or both, and a war

within either organization is inconceivable. This certainly does not rule out the possibility of war by EU and NATO members against outside states; members of both participated in the Persian Gulf War, and eight years later NATO fought its only war ever against Serbia. The point is not that Europe has become free of violence, but rather that it has become free of major inter-state war. All of the continent's significant military powers, Russia again excepted, are now in economic and political-military alliance with each other and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

If Europe's pacification removes what, for the three centuries preceding the end of World War II, was the world's primary source of large-scale inter-state warfare, the emergence of weak and failed states has dramatically elevated the relative incidence of lesser, intra-state warfare. Such states are the products of three waves of imperial disintegration that have flooded the international system with over two-hundred new states, many of them frail or altogether unviable. The first wave was World War I's destruction of the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires. The second was World War II's destruction of Europe's vast overseas colonial empires. The third was the Cold War's destruction of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and then of the Soviet Union itself.

All three waves produced states of questionable political and economic sustainability. The disappearance of imperial authority was often replaced by weak national political authority and in some cases even anarchy. Once-popular post-colonial regimes proved economically incompetent and sank into a mire of venality. And the arbitrary colonial boundaries that the new states inherited provided a source of disorder because they cut across tribal and ethnic lines as well as language and economic patterns.

Nor does disintegration appear to have halted. Successor states to empires continue to disintegrate in Africa, Southeastern Europe, the Caucasus, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.^{iv} It is an even bet that Indonesia and the Republic of South Africa will go the same way as the former Yugoslavia. Equally questionable is the long-term viability of the many Arab states whose governments have failed repeatedly to deliver to

their mushrooming masses more than the barest minimum of economic and social security, to say nothing of political freedom.

Iraq is a major case in point. The country is a failed state by virtue of the strategic incompetence of its leadership in starting two disastrous wars and because of a decade of effective international economic sanctioning. Its infrastructure is all but gone, its wealth destroyed or looted, its air space patrolled by hostile aircraft, and its Kurdish North transformed into a foreign military protectorate. Indeed, the Gulf War never really ended; it is simply being continued at a much lower level of violence. Consider also the inevitable emergence of a Palestinian state, which seems destined to be a failure absent—perhaps even in spite of—massive injections of international capital. Political divisions within the Palestinian community are severe, as they are within Israel, the chief enemy of a Palestinian state. Successful statehood presupposes not only success in dealing with enormous economic and social challenges but also Palestinian and Israeli leadership willing and able to curb die-hard extremists on both sides. These are tall orders.

To repeat, strong states are no longer the problem; weak ones are. Failed states have become the primary source of instability in the international political system, not just because war within the advanced industrial world has drastically receded, but also because failed states invite intervention by stronger states. State failure inherently attracts humanitarian intervention even when no strategic interest is present. But because the United States and its allies also have a strong stake in the present global political and economic order, they therefore have a strong stake in containing state failures' potentially adverse regional and strategic consequences. Thus the United States invaded Haiti not just to restore democracy but also to stanch the flow of unwanted Haitian refugees into America. Thus NATO moved against Serbia in 1999 not just to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo but also to preserve the Alliance's own credibility and to prevent Southeastern Europe's further destabilization.

As the world's sole remaining superpower, the United States military today performs on a global basis essentially the same imperial policing task that the British military performed within the British empire. To be

sure, the rest of the world is hardly a formal, territorial empire of the United States. But there is an American empire nonetheless: informal, voluntarily associated, and resting on political and cultural attraction as much as on military and financial clout. Scores of states and hundreds of millions of people around the world look to the United States for leadership and security, and it is in America's strategic interest that they do so.

Predictions are always dangerous in international politics, but the Gulf War of 1991 *may* be the last of its kind for the United States. Saddam Hussein did not expect war with America when he invaded Kuwait. But his crushing defeat established U.S. conventional military supremacy for all the world to see, and it is difficult to imagine a non-Western state being so obtuse as to challenge the United States on its own military terms. Asymmetric approaches to neutralizing or defeating American military power are the most appealing way of doing so—a point acknowledged in the Pentagon's *Joint Vision 2020*.^v Such approaches worked in South Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia—all failed states—and came close to working in NATO's war against Serbia—a failing if not yet failed state. During the past decade, the Pentagon has been called upon to intervene in or against one failing or failed state after another—Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Serbia, and where it has encountered resistance, it has been resistance offered by non-state actors operating unconventionally or state actors pursuing non-military strategies to reduce potential U.S. military effectiveness.

None of this is to argue that the United States can dispense with preparation for large-scale conventional war with other states. The history of international politics is full of surprises. Maintaining conventional military supremacy deters in the short-term and offers long-term insurance against the emergence of aspiring military peer competitors. To abandon preparation for conventional warfare would simply invite others to return to it. Moreover, the possibility of conventional war on the Korean Peninsula, in the Persian Gulf, and across the Taiwan Strait cannot be entirely dismissed. In each of these areas, however, adversaries are conclusively outclassed by the United States and its allies. Regional

conventional military balances have turned decisively against North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. Moreover, China's potential to become a military competitor of the United States anytime soon has been significantly oversold by Cold War defense policy refugees and defense industry hucksters.^{vi} America's lead over both enemies and allies alike in the so-called "revolution in military affairs" is widening and may become unassailable because potential competitors are unable or unwilling to make the necessary investment in capital and talent.

Even were China eventually to emerge in the coming decades as a hostile, military peer competitor—a postulation that itself rests on a questionable host of assumptions,^{vii} a Sino-American war likely would be predominately, even exclusively, a naval and air contest. These are arenas in which the comparative U.S. conventional military advantage over China is likely to remain the strongest. Avoidance of ground war on the Asian mainland has long been a wise strategic injunction for the United States, whose strategic position in East Asia since 1945 has always rested on offshore and peninsular friends and allies. Moreover, for the foreseeable future it is difficult to imagine a Sino-American *causus belli* other than a forcible Chinese attempt to place Taiwan under mainland control. Taiwan's defense, of course, is first and foremost a sea and air challenge, only secondarily a ground one.

What the Pentagon calls "stability operations" in weak or failed states is likely to consume significant U.S. military resources as long as such states remain the primary source of instability and war in the world. Technology may change *how* America fights in the future, but it is change in the international political system that will determine *who* and *why* America fights. The United States achieved global military prominence in three victorious world wars (two hot, one cold) against other great powers, but all three of those wars had an unintended byproduct: the recurring subdivision of relatively stable empires into ever larger numbers of ever smaller national entities often beset from within by the threat of anarchy. There were 51 signatories to the United Nations Treaty in 1945, a number that has more than quadrupled since then.

III. CASUALTY PHOBIA

If small wars within failing or failed states have dominated demands on U.S. military power since the Cold War's demise, a mounting aversion to incurring American casualties—and to inflicting enemy civilian and even military casualties—has come to dominate use-of-force decision-making in the United States. This aversion has been especially pronounced with respect to intervention in small wars, because such wars rarely involve direct threats to manifestly vital U.S. interests. Intervention is usually conducted in the general interest of global order and stability and often involves politically messy military enforcement of “peace” on those who have no vested interest in it. As such, public tolerance for such interventions and their potential for casualties is dramatically lower—or at least believed to be so by political and military elites—than for war on behalf of “real” interests. Even those committed to the use of force on behalf of promoting American values as opposed to protecting U.S. strategic interests take the pessimistic view that the American people are unwilling to accept significant casualties on behalf of toppling dictators, terminating genocide, and restoring civil order. This pessimism in turn has bred an American military timidity traditionally uncharacteristic of great power behavior and ultimately injurious to protection of U.S. strategic interests.

Elite casualty phobia, manifest for at least a decade but never more glaringly than in the war against Serbia, has been much discussed in recent years. The fact of elite casualty phobia is not in dispute; it is reflected in the Pentagon's obsession with force protection and confirmed by recent polling data. There is, moreover, substantial evidence that both political and military elites have convinced themselves that the American public's intolerance is significantly higher and more intractable than is actually the case. Elites nonetheless make the use-of-force decisions.

A strong aversion to casualties is, of course, rooted in American history and political culture. Americans value the individual much more than they do the state, and they have always sought, and with considerable success it might be added, to substitute technology for blood in battle. But

only recently has aversion become, at least in the minds of those making war and peace decisions, a phobia—i.e., an aversion so strong as to elevate the safety of American troops above the missions they are assigned to accomplish. Casualty aversion is healthy; casualty phobia is not. Ironically, the phobia has been strengthened by the Persian Gulf War and even more so by the war against Serbia, both of which have suggested the possibility of war with little or no American death.

The phobia is rooted in the Vietnam War, which has produced a generation of political and military leaders that is much more reluctant to use force, or at least use it effectively, than those for whom Munich and World War II were the great foreign policy exemplars. The message of Munich was the imperative of using force early and decisively against aspiring conquerors; the perceived message of Vietnam is that the risks—both battlefield and domestic political—of using force almost always outweigh the benefits. Much of the present U.S. political elite is suspicious of the very legitimacy of force, and therefore considerably ill at ease in using it.^{viii}

Ironically, this uneasiness borders on distress among much of the U.S. military leadership, especially that of the Army, which is still in the grips of the Vietnam Syndrome. The Pentagon's determination to avoid repetition of that war even on the smallest of scales prompted implementation in the 1970s of the Total Force Policy, which was designed primarily to compel presidents to clear the domestic political hurdle of a reserve call-up before marching the country into a major war. The Total Force Policy was followed in the 1980s by proclamation of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, which boils down to an elaborate intellectual excuse for not using force at all except in the most favorable strategic, operational, and domestic political circumstances. Reinforced by the Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which increased the weight and quality of military advice to civilian authority, the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine remains popular within the Pentagon and among both Republican and Democratic foreign policy minimalists on Capitol Hill.

The taproot of the Vietnam Syndrome as it has evolved since the war is the present political and military elites' conviction that the public has no

stomach for casualties, and therefore that use of force in situations of optional intervention should be prepared to sacrifice even operational effectiveness for the sake of casualty avoidance. This conviction produced almost a decade of American strategic fecklessness in the former Yugoslavia, culminating in a NATO war against Serbia in which force protection was accorded priority over mission accomplishment. The result: a bizarre disconnect between political ends and military means in which an exclusive and initially timid deployment of air power quickly provoked an acceleration of the very Serbian ethnic cleansing of Kosovo that formed NATO's immediate *causis belli*.

Consider the joint testimony of Secretary of Defense William Cohen and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Henry Shelton: "the paramount lesson learned from Operation Allied Force is that the well-being of our people must remain our first priority."^{ix} If indeed this was the premier lesson, then U.S. troops should never be exposed to combat in the first place. They should be kept at home—better yet, demobilized. Or, at a minimum, as in Operation Allied Force, policy makers should confine America's enemies to those incapable of shooting back in the air while simultaneously offering those enemies nothing to shoot at on the ground. Consider also the postwar caution of NATO's then Supreme Allied Commander, General Wesley Clark: "in an air campaign you don't want to lose aircraft because when you start to lose these expensive machines the countdown starts against you. The headlines begin to shout, 'NATO loses a second aircraft,' and the people ask, 'How long can this go on?'"^x

The presumption of public casualty intolerance—regardless of circumstances except for wars of national survival—prompts use-of-force aversion. It also removes force as a tool of coercive diplomacy, undermines the military ethic of self-sacrifice and mission accomplishment, disconcerts allies, emboldens enemies, and puts at risk foreigners who seek America's protection. To be sure, it was Serbian thugs who victimized the Albanian Kosovars, but the latter were also victimized, if indirectly, by NATO's casualty phobia.^{xi}

Indeed, casualty phobia reflects a perhaps willfully misperceived lesson of the Vietnam War that is unfortunately shared by the present U.S. political and military leadership. The lesson of Vietnam is not the public's absolute intolerance of casualties, but rather that the American people's level of tolerance hinges on such reasonable criteria as perceived strength of interests at stake and on visible progress, or lack thereof, toward a satisfactory resolution of hostilities. "There is no clear evidence that Americans will not tolerate many body bags in the course of intervention where vital interests are not at stake," observes Richard K. Betts. "What is crucial for maintaining public support is not [the incursion of] casualties per se, but casualties in an *inconclusive* war, casualties that the public sees as being suffered indefinitely, for no clear, good, or achievable purpose."^{xii} The contingent nature of the public's casualty tolerance, heavily influenced by presidential leadership in mobilizing public opinion, is supported by study after study,^{xiii} though such studies seem to make no impression upon the White House and Pentagon.

Indeed, presidential leadership and the conclusiveness of combat may be more important determinants of public tolerance of casualties than the presence of vital strategic interests (the definition of which is also mightily subject to presidential influence). Certainly, no such interests were present in Grenada in 1983, yet the quick and conclusive U.S. invasion of that island and overthrow of its Cuban-supported Marxist government was cheered by a majority of Americans. Even Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 posed no direct threat to the security of the United States, and President Bush initially had difficulty in mobilizing public and congressional support for his decision to force the Iraqis out of Kuwait one way or the other. But in the end he did so (though by only a five-vote margin in the Senate), leading the country into a war for which the public's expectation of casualties turned out to be much higher than the number actually incurred.^{xiv}

Recent comprehensive polling data and other information marshaled by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies' Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society confirms not only that "the strong belief of civilian and military elites that the American public will not support

casualties is not supported by the survey data,” but also that the “mass public says that it will accept casualties” in such scenarios as defending Taiwan and stopping Iraq from acquiring weapons of mass destruction.^{xv} The data further reveals that civilian policy makers, and even more so senior military officers, are much more casualty intolerant than the average American citizen.^{xvi}

Elite casualty phobia is thus real, but it also may be self-serving. The assumption of public casualty intolerance excuses presidents and generals alike from taking the kind of battlefield risks that might invite casualties, even though the price may be mission frustration or failure. Indeed, casualty phobia has become an important ally of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine: both serve, albeit less than perfectly, as self-deterrents to military action altogether, or, at least to risky military action, in circumstances not involving manifest threats to core U.S. security interests.

The strategic consequences of elite casualty phobia as well as its implications for the military ethic have been treated elsewhere.^{xvii} Suffice to say here that they are averse and include: political vacillation in war-threatening crises, degraded military effectiveness, lowered deterrence, discouraged friends and allies, and a morally compromised professional military ethos—and above all politically inconclusive uses of force. In the short run it is always less risky to treat the symptoms of aggression rather than its political sources. Yet casualty phobia encourages strategically indecisive, even half-baked, uses of force. A refusal to take advantage of the opportunity of war to use the force necessary to topple the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, both of whom senior American policy makers publicly compared to Adolph Hitler, simply invited more war later. To be sure, in both the Gulf War and the War Over Kosovo, U.S. political objectives were limited, and did not include enemy regime overthrow. Yet, surely, the exclusion of regime change was driven mainly by fear of the anticipated risks and costs involved.

None of this is to suggest that commanders should not do everything in their power to avoid unnecessary casualties, but the standard of judging the difference between necessary and unnecessary must be mission

accomplishment. There is wide ground between the recklessness of a George Armstrong Custer and the timidity of a George Brinton McClellan. Custer placed his own celebrity above the lives of his men, whereas McClellan placed risk avoidance ahead of mission accomplishment. The better model ought to be a Winfield Scott or a Matthew Ridgway.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR FORCE STRUCTURE AND TECHNOLOGY CHOICES

The displacement of large-scale inter-state conventional warfare by smaller, largely intra-state warfare argues strongly for abandonment of the two-major-theater-wars planning construct and greater investment in forces more suitable for the kinds of small wars and peace-enforcement enterprises that have come to dominate the Pentagon's operational agenda since the end of the Cold War. Excessive casualty aversion argues equally strongly for increased investment in air power, standoff precision-guided munitions, and space power.

It is the duty of force planners to respond to change in both the international and domestic political arenas. It is not their duty to insist that change conform to existing force structure and past technology choices, or to delude themselves into believing that mastery of conventional warfare provides sufficient military protection of U.S. strategic interests. Yet the construct of two simultaneous major theater wars based on past wars in Korea and the Persian Gulf is an apparition that hinders sound thought about, and ultimately American military effectiveness in, the post-Cold War international political environment. To be sure, one can conjure up all sorts of wars in all sorts of places,^{xviii} and it would be foolish to ignore completely the possibility of getting stuck in two of them at the same time, as the United States once did from 1941 to 1945.

But the scenario of the post-Cold War U.S. military being called upon to wage two big conventional wars at the same time speaks more to the internal budgetary and bureaucratic interests of the armed forces than it does to the radically altered external strategic environment. The scenario's main function has always been to offer a construct to preserve as much Cold War conventional force structure as possible during a period of inevitable cuts. The view of the National Defense Panel of 1997 is correct: the two-war scenario is "a force-sizing function and not a strategy. We are concerned that this construct may have become a force-protection

mechanism—a means of justifying the current force structure—especially for those searching for the certainties of the Cold War era.”^{xix}

The scenario is also, however, historically most improbable. Furthermore, it ignores the changing state of the military balance in the Persian Gulf and on the Korean Peninsula as well as recent political developments in both Koreas.

On the matter of historical improbability, it is first necessary to concede that during the Second World War the United States did indeed find itself fighting what amounted to two separate major wars, one against Germany in Europe and the other against Japan in the Pacific. But the circumstances of U.S. entry into World War II were strategically extraordinary, therefore most unlikely ever to be repeated.^{xx} The two-war construct is simply no longer intellectually viable *within the realm of reasonably acceptable strategic risk*. At no time during the twelve years of the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 did another adversary with whom the United States was not at war choose challenge to the United States militarily. States almost always go to war for reasons specific in time and place, and only rarely simply because an adversary happens to be at war with another state.

The two-war scenario is being kept alive because the armed services need it to validate existing force structure and because the State Department doesn't want to take the diplomatic heat of a one-war construct, which would imply, among other things, that if the United States was already at war in the Persian Gulf, it would not come to the assistance of Seoul if South Korea was attacked. The two-war scenario helps inside the Beltway, but it hinders those outside Washington who must implement the strategy.

Moreover, one cannot even speak of a conventional military balance any longer in the Persian Gulf. There is little hostile power on the northern side left for American might to balance. Revolution, war, and international isolation destroyed Iran's capacity to project conventional military power beyond its borders, and the Gulf War crippled Iraq's once vaunted army. Even the State Department has demoted Iraq, Iran (and North Korea) from “rogue states” to “states of concern.”

As for North Korea, it operates in an exceptionally unfavorable strategic environment. Its superpower patron has disappeared, its economy has all but failed, its military is obsolete, and it faces a much more powerful South Korea backed by a credible U.S. military guarantee. War would be suicide for the North's communist regime, and there is no reason to believe that the North Korean leadership is blind to this reality. Estimates of war's probability on the Peninsula must also take into account political change, and here the news is even better. Significant leadership change has taken place in both Seoul and Pyongyang, resulting in a publicly convivial face-to-face meeting between the two heads of state that would have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago. The meeting did not, of course, remove the mighty obstacles to Korea's reunification, but the beginning of a direct political dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang surely reduces the chances of war.

The two-war construct could be replaced by a one-war-plus standard, the "plus" being one or more of what the Pentagon now terms "small scale contingencies," the most demanding of which would be small wars like the war against Serbia and such peace-enforcement operations as those now being performed in Bosnia and Kosovo. The United States has never been prepared to fund the forces necessary to do justice to a realistic two-war scenario since it was first postulated in the mis-titled 1993 *Bottom-Up Review*. This ends/means gap has been the biggest open defense secret in Washington.^{xxi} A potential added advantage of moving to a one-plus standard would be moving the defense debate off the mantra of force size to that of force composition.

Indeed, effective policing of failed states requires forces dedicated to that mission. Peace enforcement is as different from "real" war as are special operations, for which the United States retains dedicated forces under a separate command. To be sure, existing U.S. conventional forces already bring much to the peace enforcement table. Among the items they can and have provided are logistics support, transport, communications, and surveillance. And in the case of such things as major evacuations and enforcing "no-fly" zones, only conventional forces can do the job. Yet, conventional ground forces and operational/tactical doctrines are not

suitable for peace enforcement operations. The starting point rules of engagement for such operations—as it is for counter-insurgency operations—is the imperative of utmost restraint and discrimination in applying force. Firepower is an instrument of last rather than first resort. There is no big enemy to close with and destroy, but rather the presence of threatened civilian populations that must be protected in a way that minimizes collateral damage. Conventional ground force preparation for peace enforcement accordingly requires major doctrinal and training deprogramming of conventional military habits and reprogramming with alien tactics, doctrine, and heavy political oversight of enforcement operations. Needless to say, forces so reprogrammed—commonly manpower intensive and relatively low firepower—will not be optimized for big, high-tech conventional conflicts. Peace enforcement operations require the patient performance of mostly non-heroic missions often under conditions of prolonged and severe stress. Satisfaction of a job well done hinges on dramatic events, such as resumption of hostilities, that *don't* happen, that *don't* make the headlines.

Richard K. Betts objects that dedicated forces are impractical because Congress would not likely tolerate creation of significant forces that would not be available for standard conventional military missions but would require increases in defense spending. Yet Betts concedes that the only alternatives would be to minimize U.S. commitments to peace enforcement operations or accept the higher risk that other missions make come up short.^{xxii} Moreover, there is no way to determine the level of future U.S. involvement in peace operations, which will be decided in part by a combination of presidential preference and the pressure of external events and other actors. The United States is also entering the strange new world of huge federal budget surpluses, which opens up the possibility of larger defense budgets.

The post-Cold War era of small, mostly intra-state wars also suggests the need for a new look at the distribution of heavy, medium, and light combat forces within the Army. Army Chief of Staff Eric K. Shinseki has already initiated just such an assessment, though the direction in which he is headed has not been greeted with enthusiasm by the armor and artillery

communities. The idea is to create “medium” forces that are much more quickly deployable than heavy units but have significantly greater firepower than light forces. An interim force of up to eight brigades will be organized around off-the-shelf armored fighting vehicles weighing no more than 20 tons (compared to the 60-70-ton Abrams tank) and mounting new technology guns of smaller than current tank caliber but of equal lethality. Each brigade, which would be carved out of existing Army force structure—largely at the expense of heavy divisions—would be deployable by air anywhere overseas in 96 hours, and a medium division within 120 hours.^{xxiii}

During the war against Serbia, the Army was embarrassed by its strategic immobility, epitomized by the fiasco of Task Force Hawk, which consumed five tons for each of the 6,200 troops deployed (300 C-17 sorties).^{xxiv} Gen. Shinseki sees medium forces as a solution. His bold force structure initiative moves the Army away not only from the Cold War but also from a decade of self-congratulation over the Gulf War, which undoubtedly accounts in part for the considerable internal resistance of the “heavies” (the Army’s armor and artillery “unions”) to the creation of medium forces. Gen. Shinseki originally envisaged a medium force of up to five divisions, all based on wheeled rather than tracked vehicles.^{xxv} But he has had to settle for no more than eight brigades and a reopening of the issue of wheeled v. tracked vehicles. Too, Gen. Shinseki may be retired before his already reduced medium force initiative fully “takes” within the Army.

Medium forces as envisaged by Gen. Shinseki might indeed have been usable with considerable effectiveness in the war against Serbia. But President Clinton’s prior political decision to exclude employment of any ground forces presumably would have included even strategically mobile medium forces. However, the unavailability of such forces may have reinforced his decision, and future presidents in different overseas crises might use them if they were available.

Indeed, the war against Serbia revealed the Army to be the chief loser to elite casualty phobia. Commitment of ground forces conveys greater seriousness of political resolve than commitment of air and sea forces

precisely because ground forces are the most manpower intensive and therefore the greatest source of casualties. The chief beneficiary of casualty phobia predictably has been air power in general and the Air Force in particular. For all the talk of “jointness” since passage of Goldwater-Nichols, presidents in the post-Cold War world of small wars have increasingly embraced air power as a *substitute* for ground power. Thus the emerging predilection for cruise missiles over manned aircraft, and manned aircraft over anything on the ground—a predilection greatly reinforced by air power’s single-handed victory in the war against Serbia at no cost in Americans killed in action. The U.S. Army was excluded altogether from combat, performing instead the *postwar* mission of peace enforcement.

Even when Iraq challenged concrete U.S. strategic interests in the Persian Gulf a decade ago, Operation Desert Storm was crafted and conducted with casualty minimization as the first order of business. In fact, AirLand Battle was effectively disassembled into a sequential air campaign followed by a short ground war, with most of the air war serving as a gigantic artillery “prep” of Iraqi ground forces. The Army swept up Iraqi crockery smashed largely by air power.^{xxvi}

The argument here is not that the United States can or should rely from now on primarily, even exclusively, upon air power to do its military business; rather it is that *the political attractiveness of air power to a casualty-phobic national leadership is likely to reduce National Command Authority consideration of ground combat options in a crisis*. This will be true especially in small-war circumstances, which rarely include the presence of first-order strategic interests.

Admittedly, an air-option-only approach to dealing with small wars would be a mistake. Aside from conveying reluctance of political will to adversaries and allies alike, the military effectiveness of such an approach would be inherently circumscribed by air power’s own limitations. Air power’s record as a tool of political coercion is not impressive in the absence of other factors at play,^{xxvii} including the presence of ground forces. And as the war against Serbia demonstrated, air power can influence but not control events on the ground. Withholding ground forces simply because of fear of casualties renders the United States a one-

armed superpower. It also reduces air power's potential effectiveness because the very presence of U.S. ground forces, even if not actually committed to combat, forces the enemy to concentrate his ground forces, thereby increasing their vulnerability to air attack.

Nonetheless, *if the present level of casualty phobia persists among U.S. political and military elites, then those elites have an obligation to shift defense dollars away from ground power and toward air power.* What is the point of continuing to maintain the present level of investment in strategically sluggish heavy ground forces in an era of markedly declining prospects for large-scale conventional wars involving the United States and of declining political will to place ground forces in general in harm's way? This is not an Army v. Air Force issue; the U.S. Navy's surface fleet is organized primarily around air power, and it made indispensable contributions to the air war against Serbia.

Precedent for a budgetary redistribution toward air power may be found in the 1950s. Whatever the weaknesses of the strategy of Massive Retaliation, the strategy represented a conscious decision by President Eisenhower to base the security of the United States on deterrence via the instrument of nuclear-armed air power. From this decision flowed a dramatic redirection of defense spending away from conventional military forces and into the nuclear and air power (especially long-range bombardment) accounts. By the late 1950s, almost half of the U.S. defense budget was going to the Air Force, which was dominated by the now-defunct Strategic Air Command.

The point is not whether Massive Retaliation was good or bad; rather, it is that the strategy had budgetary imperatives that Eisenhower recognized and acted upon. So too does the present national leadership's de facto embrace of an air-only-if-possible-and-still-air-mostly-if-not strategy in precisely the kind of small wars that have come to dominate the international political landscape. If, from here on, air power is going to do America's heavy military lifting with ground forces sitting along the sidelines, then the defense budget ought to reflect this new reality.

Within the air accounts, moreover, additional money should be moved into technologies that reduce air crew exposure to possible loss. This

means investment in ever longer-range stand-off precision munitions, and, above all, in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The greater the precision, the smaller the munition required, and therefore the greater the reduction of impact on people and things not intentionally targeted.

Increased reliance on UAVs (which include cruise missiles) and on large stand-off platforms like the B-2 may encounter resistance among the so-called “fighter mafia” which dominates the Air Force leadership. Pilotless vehicles are just that, and the leadership values acquisition of the F-22 above all else, including a reopening of the B-2 production line and creation of precision munitions stocks on hand sufficient to preclude the risk of encountering wartime shortages (as was the case in the War Over Kosovo). Yet UAVs and the B-2 satisfy the imperatives of elite casualty phobia. Both are difficult to target; the UAVs in any event don’t have aircrew; and while B-2s do, the ratio of crew to capacity to deliver precision munitions swamps that of any “tactical” aircraft. During the war against Serbia, a total of 22 strategic bombers (6 B-2s, 6 B-1s, and 10 B-52s) accounted for over one-half (12,000 out of 23,000) bombs and missiles expended against Serbian targets.^{xxviii}

Of particular priority is the need for an autonomously-piloted vehicle. Such a vehicle has been advocated for years, but the technology required is still out of reach, as is even some of the science. A UAV that is remotely controlled has great limitations because the situational awareness of the “pilot,” and to obtain that awareness would require a large data “pipe” that could be vulnerable and almost certainly would greatly increase the cost of the UAV. An autonomous vehicle solves these problems, yet introduces others because it would require a computer that could “think” and that would be asked to make life-and-death decisions on the battlefield. These are not insurmountable challenges, but they demand increased funding.

Investment in the search for effective non-lethal technologies also needs acceleration, in part because dual-use targets are becoming increasingly important objects of air power’s employment as a tool of coercive diplomacy. “Brute force” bombs and missiles are fine for blowing up big fixed targets and large enemy forces out in the open, but they are not optimized to take down power grids, “fry” electronics, and

“zap” communications in a manner that minimizes collateral damage. Here, lasers can play a role, but high-powered microwave systems hold the best promise because their dial-a-kill allows them to be tailored to a particular target.

Finally, there is the issue of space. Space has become inseparable from air power, and it reinforces air power’s capacity to minimize friendly military and enemy civilian casualties. The question is whether space should continue to be kept weapon-free or integrated into the U.S. military’s overall offensive and defensive capabilities. The very use of the term “aerospace” power suggests the answer.

* * * *

In making decisions to use—or not use—military force, presidents must weigh considerations of both military effectiveness and domestic politics. The United States is, after all, a democracy, and, contrary to conventional wisdom, politics never stopped at the water’s edge. Yet if perceived domestic political considerations become the enemy of military effectiveness, to the point of arbitrarily excluding use of one form of military power in its entirety—and this is the direction where America unfortunately seems to be headed in the present era of small wars in out-of-the-way places, then the United States must alter established force structure and patterns of defense spending to maximize the effectiveness of the forms of military power it *is* prepared to use.

It is clear that the ground force component can devise new and interesting approaches to mitigate the casualty issue and make itself a more relevant tool for presidents in this interregnum of relative peace. The White House always needs as many politically usable military options in a crisis as it can get. For the moment, however, it is the air arm that offers the quickest and most viable solutions because of its intrinsic nature of being above the fight.

Notes

ⁱ. This monograph draws on several of the author's recent works, including: "Foreign Policy Incoherence and Military Timidity: Sources and Consequences," *Strategic Review* (Fall 2000); "From Tet to Kosovo: How Defeat in Vietnam Altered America's Use of Force Overseas," *The Long Term View* (Summer 2000); "Force Protection Fetishism: Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Summer 2000); "Operation Allied Force: Yet Another Wake-Up Call for the Army?", *Parameters* (Winter 1999-2000); *Serbia and Vietnam, A Preliminary Comparison of the U.S. Decisions to Use Force* (Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, 1998); and *The Creeping Irrelevance of U.S. Force Planning* (Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1998).

ⁱⁱ. Michael Mandelbaum, "Is Major War Obsolete?", *Survival* (Winter 1998-1999), p. 25.

ⁱⁱⁱ. John Mueller, *Quiet Cataclysm, Reflections on the Recent Transformation of World Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995, p. 34. Also see Michael Mandelbaum, *The Dawn of Peace in Europe* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1996).

^{iv}. For a discussion failed states and their implications for the nature of war in the post-Cold War era, see Martin van Creveld *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging, Journeys Into the New Nationalism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993); Philippe Delmas, *The Rosy Future of War* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Robert D. Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth, A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* (New York: Random House, 1996); and Mary Kaldor, *New Wars and Old Wars, Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999).

^v. "We have superior conventional warfighting capabilities and effective nuclear deterrence today, but this favorable military balance is not static. In the face of such strong capabilities, the appeal of asymmetric approaches and the focus on the development of niche capabilities will increase. By developing and using approaches that avoid U.S. strengths and exploit potential vulnerabilities using significantly different methods of operation, adversaries will attempt to create conditions that effectively delay, deter, or counter the application of U.S. military capabilities." *Joint Vision 2020* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, June 2000), p. 6.

^{vi}. See Chalmers Johnson, "In Search of a New Cold War," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* (September/October 1999), pp. 44-51.

^{vii}. The postulation presumes *all* of the following: the presence of historically unfounded Chinese imperial ambitions beyond East Asia; renewed Chinese double-digit annual GDP growth rates that vanished in 1997; continued autocracy in Beijing notwithstanding the information revolution, the emergence of a large middle class, and the growing material corruption of the communist elite; and the ability of any national government in China to accommodate explosive economic and social change. China-as-the-new-Soviet-Union also ignores China's critical dependence on the global capitalist economy. Unlike the Soviet Union, post-Mao China has sought not economic autarky but rather integration in the international economic order. It is far more dependent on foreign markets than the Soviet Union ever was and has amassed huge trade surpluses with the United States. China's stake in world trade would be threatened by any military confrontation with the United States and its East Asian allies.

^{viii}. See the author's *Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy, Munich, Vietnam, and American Use of Force Since 1945*. Occasional Paper No. 4 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, March 1998).

^{ix}. Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen and General Henry H. Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Statement on Kosovo After Action Review," before the Senate Armed Services Committee, October 14, 1999, p. 27.

^x. Wesley K. Clark, "The United States and NATO; The Way Ahead," *Parameters* (Winter 1999-2000), pp. 8-9.

^{xi}. To be sure, Milosevic was always in a position to accelerate Kosovo's ethnic cleaning more quickly than NATO could put in place opposite Serbia a ground combat force option capable of stopping it. However, an early attempt to put one in place might have conveyed sufficient seriousness of intent to deter Operation Horseshoe. It could not possibly have been less discouraging that President Clinton's public renunciation of a NATO ground force option.

^{xii}. Richard K. Betts, "What Will It Take to Deter the United States?," *Parameters* (Winter 1995-96), p. 76. Also see Andrew P.N. Erdmann, "The U.S. Presumption of Quick, Costless Wars," *Orbis* (Summer 1999), pp. 363-381.

^{xiii}. See, for example, the following studies performed by the Rand Corporation of Santa Monica, California: Mark Lorrell and Charles Kelley, Jr., *Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy During the Vietnam War*, 1985; Benjamin C. Schwarz, *Casualties, Public Opinion, and U.S. Military Intervention, Implications for U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies*, 1994; and Eric V. Larson *Casualties and Consensus, The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations*, 1996.

^{xiv}. Though U.S. casualties were miraculously low (146 killed in action, over a third by friendly fire), both the public and Capitol Hill were prepared to accept a much higher toll. Operation Desert Storm was planned by the Pentagon and authorized by the President on the assumption that American war dead might number in the thousands. See Erdmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 375-376; and John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 45, 124, 306-307.

^{xv}. Digest of Findings and Studies Presented to the Conference on the Military and Civilian Society, Catigny Conference Center, 1st Division Museum, 28-29 October 1999. <http://www.unc.edu/depts/tiss/CIVMIL.htm>, p. 5.

^{xvi}. Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "How Many Deaths are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1999.

^{xvii}. See, for example, Edward N. Luttwak, "Where Are the Great Powers?," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 1994), pp. 23-28; James Nathan, "The Rise and Decline of Coercive Statecraft," *Proceedings* (October 1995), pp. 59-65; Mark J. Conversino, "Sawdust Superpower: The Perceptions of U.S. Casualty Tolerance in the Post-Gulf War Era," *Strategic Review* (Winter 1997), pp. 15-23; and Karl P. Mueller, "Politics, Death, and Morality in U.S. Foreign Policy" and Charles K. Hyde, "Casualty Aversion: Implications for Policy Makers and Senior Military Officers," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Summer 2000), pp. 12-16 and 17-27, respectively.

^{xviii}. In a 1984 professional conference, the author was berated by a noted defense policy analyst for dismissing the Bering Strait as a likely avenue of a Soviet invasion of the continental United States. More recently, he learned from a colleague that a hostile India will emerge as America's next great strategic rival.

^{xix}. *Transforming Defense, National Security in the 21st Century*, Report of the National Defense Panel, December 1997, pp. 23-24.

^{xx}. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and Hitler's utterly gratuitous declared of war on the United States four days later proved to be strategic disasters for both Tokyo and Berlin. This was hardly the first or last time the United States faced a strategically incompetent adversary, but it was the only time it faced two of them simultaneously.

^{xxi}. The author has participated in several war games in recent years designed to test the capacity of extant forces to handle two overlapping wars in the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia. In each case, shortages in airlift, bombers, stand-off precision munitions and other critical items were offset by rigged and often unrealistic turns of events postulated by game controllers.

^{xxii}. Richard K. Betts, *Military Readiness, Concepts, Choices, Consequences* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995), pp. 202-204.

^{xxiii}. See "Highlights of the AUSA's Annual Meeting," *Army* (December 1999), pp. 45-52; Edward B. Atkeson, "Main Battle Tanks, To be or Not to be?," *Army* (January 2000), pp. 37-40; Scott R. Gourley, "New Brigade Structure Begins to Emerge," *Army* (February 2000), pp. 33-34; Scott R. Gourley, "The Army Stages a Kentucky Demo to Define 'the Art of the Possible'," *Army* (March 2000), pp. 20-26; Jason Sherman, "Dream Work," *Armed Forces Journal International* (May 2000), pp. 25-28; Daniel L. Whiteside, "Slow Down!," *Armed Forces Journal International* (May 2000), pp. 30-33; Mark J. O'Konski, "Enhancing Army Deployability," *Army* (May 2000), pp. 29-31; and Theodore G. Stroup, Jr., "The Ongoing Army Transformation," *Army* (July 2000), pp. 7-10.

^{xxiv}. Dana Priest, "Army's Apache Helicopter Rendered Impotent," *Washington Post*, December 29, 1999; Sean D. Naylor, "Apache Task Force Deploys to Albania," *Army Times*, April 19, 1999, p. 8; Sean D. Naylor, "On Our Way to Hell," *Army Times*, May 3, 1999, p. 10; and Matthew Cox, "Troops and Tanks Beef Up Task Force Hawk," *Army Times*, May 10, 1999, p. 14.

^{xxv}. "Highlights of AUSA's Meeting," op. cit., p. 49.

^{xxvi}. This is certainly not to belittle the Army's and the Marine Corps' contribution to final victory. For Saddam Hussein, ground combat and the taking of territory is what war is all about, and it is more than coincidental that he ordered Kuwait's evacuation only after Coalition ground forces had—unexpectedly to him—entered Iraqi territory.

^{xxvii}. The War Over Kosovo is a case in point. Obviously, Milosevic would not have quit absent the bombing. Yet other factors of unknown relative importance were also at play: a softening of NATO's original settlement terms; Russia's diplomatic defection to the G-7 war termination position; indications that NATO was moving toward a ground combat option; and increased Kosovo Liberation Army activity on the ground. The coercive success of Operation Deliberate Force's 1995 air strikes against Bosnian-Serb targets in Bosnia also must be seen in the context of other events, including Bosnian Serb defeat on the ground by Croatian and Bosnia Muslim forces, and Milosevic's decision to cease Belgrade's military and diplomatic support of the Bosnian Serb government.

^{xxviii}. Hans Mark, address before the Potomac Institute's Conference on "Out of the Box and Into the Future: A Dialogue Between Warfighters and Scientists on Far-Future Warfare (2025)," June 27, 2000, Washington, D.C. Conference proceedings soon to be available at www.potomacinstitute.org.

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